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Editor's Watch

First Quarter, 2006

Vol. 29, No. 1

## **Intelligent Design as Science**

by

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My most recent *Capital Commentary* ("Intelligent Schools, Courts, and Science," 12/26/05; [http://www.cpjustice.org/story/storyReader\\$1344](http://www.cpjustice.org/story/storyReader$1344)) focused attention on the inappropriateness of judges and public officials making decisions about what teachers should teach. The occasion was a federal court decision that struck down any "religious" qualification of the teaching of evolution in Dover, Pennsylvania's high school. What I did not do in that commentary was to address the subject of Intelligent Design itself, an approach to the study of biology that calls into question some of the most basic assumptions of evolutionary theory.

It is a delight, now, at this juncture to be able to point readers to an excellent assessment of Intelligent Design by Uko Zylstra, a professor of biology at Calvin College ([zylu@calvin.edu](mailto:zylu@calvin.edu)). Zylstra published a substantial essay on the subject, titled "Intelligent-Design Theory: An Argument for Biotic Laws," in the journal *Zygon* (vol. 39, no. 1, March, 2004). Here is the abstract of that essay:

A central thesis of intelligent-design theorists is that physical and chemical laws and chance are insufficient to account for irreducibly complex biological structures and that intelligent design is necessary to account for such phenomena. This assertion, however, still implies a reductionist ontology. We need to recognize that reality displays multiple modes of being beyond simply chemical and physical modes of being, each of which is governed by laws for that mode of being. This essay argues for an alternate framework for understanding life phenomena that is neither philosophical materialism nor intelligent-design theory.

In essence, what Zylstra does is to argue that the whole of reality begs for an answer deeper than science can provide of why anything exists at all and why things exist in the way they do, with millions of kinds of creatures conforming to various kinds of laws—physical, chemical, biotic, psychic, logical, historical, economic, and more. If some theorists hypothesize that everything can be explained in terms physical and chemical processes plus time and chance, their theory is reductionistic. But if intelligent-design theorists simply add the

hypothesis that a designer, standing outside the physical and chemical processes, needs to be posited to account for irreducible complexity, they still haven't accounted for the biotic laws that hold for the development of living things.

In a more recent essay that Zylstra is preparing for translation and publication in a Dutch magazine, he adds to the argument of his *Zygon* essay. The new essay, "Is Intelligent-Design Theory an Appropriate Response to Evolutionary Naturalism?" builds on the work of Keith Stewart Thomson, who distinguishes three different meanings of evolution—evolution as pattern, as process, and as mechanism. The fossil record, for example, shows a *pattern* of sequential appearance of different kinds of living beings. If next one says, for example, that fish gave rise to amphibians, one is speaking of an evolutionary *process*. And finally, if one argues that "the means by which that process [including natural selection] came about" is evolution, then one is speaking of evolution as a *mechanism*.

Zylstra believes that the fossil record "provides abundant evidence for evolution as *pattern*." With respect to evolution as *process*, however, "there is much less empirical evidence" for evolution. The problem in speaking of evolution in the third sense arises "when the *mechanism* of natural selection is taken to be sufficient as the causal mechanism for the evolution of all the structures and complex processes in living things." This problem, says Zylstra, is the one that Michael Behe, an intelligent-design theorist, properly highlights "in his claim that irreducibly complex structures and processes cannot come about through the Darwinian process of natural selection."

The key issue in the debate between evolutionary theorists and intelligent-design (ID) theorists, says Zylstra, is that of causality. "The ID theorists want to posit an intelligent cause in addition to 'natural causes.' The difficulty with this, however, is that both evolutionary biologists and ID theorists assume a reductionist ontology with regard to natural causes. Natural causes are seen as physical and chemical causality. . . . I don't believe that positing intelligent design as a causal agent for such irreducible complexity is the appropriate response," says Zylstra. What hasn't been taken into account is the biotic mode of existence. "Life phenomena are not material in nature. Life is a mode of being, a function of living things. Biology textbooks generally promote this major misconception by the frequent reference to 'living matter'. But the expression 'living matter' is an oxymoron. Matter itself is never alive. . . . We always find whole living organisms. Matter is fundamentally physical and chemical in nature and thus subject to chemical and physical laws." The inadequacy of ID theory, Zylstra believes, is its "failure to recognize the life function of living things," which exist in accord with biotic laws and not only physical or chemical laws.

This is not to say that recognizing biotic laws then allows one to dismiss design in the universe. But it means that everything, including the biotic and all other modes of existence, including the physical and chemical modes, are part of the bigger question that needs to be answered by reference to an origin that transcends all creatures and the laws that govern their existence. One cannot simply add intelligent design to physical and chemical laws and come up with an explanation of biotic development.

Zylstra's essays present his detailed evaluation and critique of both evolutionary theory and ID. We need not try to summarize that here. I will simply conclude with Zylstra's conclusion to his not-yet-published essay. He asks whether his criticism of ID eliminates the hypothesis of intelligent design?

I don't believe so. I would affirm that all of reality is contingent upon the Creator and that all law-governed reality is indicative of intelligent design. But intelligent design is not thereby made into a causal agent. Natural laws, including biotic laws, are the very foundation for the presence and recognition of intelligent design in the world. A deeper theory of natural laws, as that developed by [philosopher Herman] Dooyeweerd, emphasizes the fact that irreducibility of living things is due to the irreducibility of law structures for higher modes of being. This irreducibility is the basis for the irreducibly complex structures characteristic of living things. This irreducibility is also indicative of the discontinuity of levels of being and thus levels of organization. Higher levels do not simply emerge from lower levels; laws for higher levels don't emerge from laws for lower levels. Life is not some material substance that can be reduced in its analysis to chemical and physical properties. Life is a function of living things that are subject to biotic laws. The irreducibility of biological structures and phenomena are thus to be attributed to the irreducibility of biotic laws to chemical and physical laws not to some intelligent design as a causal agent.

If the subject of evolution and intelligent design is something you want to know more about and understand better, then I would urge you to contact Prof. Uko Zylstra to gain access to his work (zylu@calvin.edu).

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[The primary institution supporting the work of intelligent-design theorists is the Discovery Institute in Seattle, Washington ([www.discovery.org](http://www.discovery.org)). In the middle of the Dover, Pennsylvania school court case (Kitzmiller v. Dover School District), Discovery Institute released a report to dispel confusion over its involvement in that case. To access that report ("Setting the Record Straight about Discovery Institute's Role in the Dover School District Case," November 10, 2005), go to the institute's web site or call them at 206-292-0401.]